

The Example of James Sanpha Koroma

A lot of public officials with intimidating challenges in life draw back in fear and horror, fold their hands and give up in exasperation. They say it cannot happen because they have never seen it happen before. Some become totally overwhelmed by things they cannot apprehend - turn such things into symbols of worship. Not so with a well cultured and quint-essential gentleman like James Sanpha Koroma whose name is synonymous with genius. He does not just watch things happen; he always has a goal.

History is pleasantly full of men and women in various walks of life who possess a special ability to see into the future. In the banking world, the man who has this uncanny capacity is James Sanpha Koroma. He is a former senior civil servant and seasoned economist whose banking profession anchored on seeing possibilities in what the vast majority of his peers saw as impossible.

Background

Sanpha Koroma is a Sierra Leonean born in the Yoni Chiefdom of Tonkolili District in the Northern Province. He has lived most of his life in this country except for three brief spells in the United States and England as a postgraduate student. The third time he had to go out of the country was when he had to leave his job as Managing Director of NDB after been pursued by the late James Bambay Kamara for imagined crimes.

Sanpha Koroma was born into a very humble family and his father was a railway worker who moved from one railway station to another. So he had to attend primary school at Magburaka, St. Anthony in Freetown and then finally the Prince of Wales, Kingtom, Freetown, when it was purely a science school.

Sanpha Koroma did not live much with his family but they were reasonably comfortable enough to give him an education through secondary school and then Fourah Bay College. So, when it was time to go abroad, he left comfortably with the help of his parents.

Though he has a humble beginning, Sanpha Koroma was fortunate enough to have been put through school. But like any other provincial boy, he used to stay with an uncle in Freetown because his father and mother were in the provinces. During the holidays, he would go back to his family in the provinces. And since his

father was moving from one railway station to another, Sanpha Koroma had a brother and a sister who spoke Mende because they were born in Mende land. Sanpha Koroma went through Prince of Wales comfortably between 1959 and 1965 excelling each year. He went to Fourah Bay College - University of Durham. At FBC, Sanpha Koroma went through his course with a scholarship. He graduated with BA (Econs.) in 1969 and later went to the United States as a post-graduate student of Maxwell School, Syracuse University, and graduated with MA in Public Finance.

Family

Sanpha Koroma has been married for 27 years to Anne Koroma and they are blessed with three boys, all of them adults now. His wife was a lecturer at the Milton Margai College of Education and Technology (MMCET) for a number of years and retired in 2005 as Head of Department of Education.

Man of Principles

Sanpha Koroma took up his inspiration from his father who was very disciplined and organized in whatever he did. He holds the view that unless someone is organized and has a focus, you will never make it because you should have a goal. His goal after secondary school was to enter FBC and study there because he did not want to go to abroad. He also had the desire to be a graduate of FBC and to enter the civil service to be a government official. Indeed, he achieved that goal after his studies abroad, and he was determined to make it in the civil service.

Role models

As a man who grew up in Sierra Leone when there were role models, Sanpha Koroma has two role models who influenced his professional life. One is the late Bank Governor, Samuel Bangura, a very successful and likeable man who rose from humble beginning and became the second indigenous colonial Governor of Central Bank. The late Governor attended Bo School and spoke Temne and Mende fluently. He worked with Sanpha Koroma and was a great inspiration to him.

The other role model who also happened to work with Sanpha Koroma at Central Bank was Dr. Nicol Cole. He was also a very straight forward and hard working man. Sanpha also reads a lot of biography about successful people some of whom are his role models.

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The visionary banker

After the banker escaped unlawful arrest in Sierra Leone, he went to the Federal Republic of Nigeria and comfortably secured a UN job at the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, UNIDO, as Financial Analyst. He also served as Chief Technical Advisor for SME Project Funding and Evaluation at the Nigerian Industrial Development Bank as well as for the Nigerian Investment Promotion Forum for the preparation of the First Industrial Investment Forum. James Sanpha Koroma worked in Nigeria for four consecutive years. With that experience, he returned to Sierra Leone and set up a consultancy with a view to setting up a bank in Sierra Leone.

Sanpha and ECO Bank

In 1994, James Sanpha Koroma entered into a contract with Eco Bank with a view for its establishment in Sierra Leone but the rebel war was already threatening to enter Freetown. After completing the feasibility studies for EcoBank, the Chairman and Managing Director of Eco Bank jetted into Freetown for further discussions. They decided not to do business in Sierra Leone at the time because of the war and the project fell through.

Unshaken by the decision, James Sanpha Koroma cleverly used the feasibility studies he had carried out to turn his attention to the Union Trust Bank (UTB). He fulfilled all the necessary conditions for the setting up of the bank after he had raised money from friends and colleagues.

But just when UTB was about to take off in earnest, the banking guru was called by the Central Bank of Sierra Leone to salvage the life of Meridien-BIAO Bank (SL) Limited in 1995. The bank was on the brink of collapse after the Central Bank had advanced it so much money. The fear of the Central Bank at the time was that the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) had just collapsed and people lost their money; they did not want a repeat of

The banking world

James Sanpha Koroma's romance with the banking world was by dint of accident and not by design although he studied Finance Monetary Economics. With strong academic background, James Sanpha Koroma joined the Sierra Leone Civil Service in 1974 after he returned home from the United States of America (USA) with a Master's degree in Public Finance at the Maxwell School, Syracuse.

The professional banker was a Senior Economist at the Ministry of Finance. He rose to the rank of Permanent Secretary and retired on pension in 1990. His time at the Finance Ministry was not without hiccups.

While serving as Deputy Financial Secretary at the Ministry of Finance, he disagreed with the late Jamil Sahid Mohamed on account of his stubborn opposition to the establishment of the infamous Precious Minerals Marketing Company (PMMC), which was under the iron grip of the late business magnate. As a punishment for the disagreement, James Sanpha Koroma was removed from the Ministry of Finance because the late Jamil Sahid Mohamed had so much power. But because of his orientation, he was appointed Managing Director of National Development Bank, NDB, in 1986. His transfer to the bank was considered at the time to be a serious pun-

ishment and demotion in that NDB was in ruins. But with much determination, James Sanpha Koroma started from scratch and successfully restructured and rehabilitated the Bank. He established branches and rendered it enormously profitable. In fact during his tenure NDB was able to pay dividends for the first time in its thirty-two years history. That was how his banking career started by that dint of accident. The highly professional and dedicated economist never looked back after four years of successfully running NDB.

As Managing Director of NDB, James Sanpha Koroma also represented a constituency comprising Sierra Leone, Ghana, The Gambia and Liberia on the Executive Board of the African Development Bank Group for two years with integrity and panache. Nonetheless, one of his defining moments came in 1990 when the late Inspector General of Police, James Bambay Kamara, had wanted to arrest him for an imagined crime relating to transfer of money after former President Joseph Saidu Momoh had declared an economic state of emergency in the country. But when James Sanpha Koroma got wind of his imminent arrest and upon consultation with his lawyer, he fled the country in haste without saying goodbye to his wife at home.

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such an ugly scenario. Sanpha was approached to help in saving the banking business of the Meridien Bank. James Sanpha Koroma consented to the request of the Central Bank and successfully salvaged the banking business and agreed to acquire the banking business of Meridien-BIAO Bank (SL) Limited in 1995 and in so doing protected the interests of all those who had their savings with the said bank. Two months after the acquisition the bank went in to liquidation.

Translating dreams to reality

By the time ECOBank was established in Sierra Leone Union Trust Bank had been in existence for more than ten years. James Sanpha Koroma started benefiting from the fruit of his labour in 1995 when he became the founding Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of UTB.

Much impressed by his classical display of professionalism in the banking world, former President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah in March 1998 appointed James Sanpha Koroma as Governor, Central Bank of Sierra Leone. The UTB Board of Directors then appointed his Deputy, Mr. Anthony to fill the vacuum in the same year. Next in the driving seat at UTB was Okrafo Smart who took the mantle of CEO from 2000 to 2006 and when the founding Managing Director and CEO returned to UTB, he served initially as adviser because there were a lot of internal problems. Those problems were professionally handled with consummate ease before James Sanpha Koroma again served as the Managing Director and CEO from 2006 to January 2008 when President Ernest Bai Koroma appointed him as Secretary to the President and Principal Adviser. He held the position for eight months before he resigned for something his subordinate did which the President did not like. James Sanpha Koroma took responsibility for that and eventually had to resign amidst speculation of corruption.

Upon his resignation and much to his dismay the Civil Society Movement involved itself in a charade to find him wanting. Consequently, a Commission of Enquiry - Committee of Criminal Enquiry - was set up to investigate the incident. The findings of the Enquiry and his reasons for resigning were published. The report of the committee, which comprised mainly members of the Civil Society Movement, exonerated James Sanpha Koroma from the incident and those who went for the jugular were publicly embarrassed.

Sanpha as Bank Governor

Sanpha went to the Central Bank at a very crucial time after the rebels had entered Freetown and had left the bank in ruins. There were virtually no seats, there were no records and the staff had gone away. To make matters worse, there was no Governor or Deputy Governor to hand over to him. Undeterred by these obvious handicaps James Sanpha Koroma drew from his vast experience of both the good times and the bad times and set about the rehabilitation of the Central Bank. His first move was to ensure that highly professional and dedicated staff was employed at Central Bank to get it up and running. The bank was also completely structurally rehabilitated and James Sanpha Koroma went an extra mile to complete the Bank Tower, which was started by the late Bank Governor, Samuel Bangura, in 1979. He did that in only sixteen months and opened it officially in 1999 after four previous Governors had failed to complete the building.

And by the time Sanpha left the Central Bank on March 2003, it was one of the best Central Banks in West Africa.

Sanpha on the proliferation of banks

James Sanpha Koroma envisaged the proliferation of foreign private banks in Sierra Leone during his banquet speech in 2001 when he was a Bank Governor. In the first place, he had a disagreement with former President Kabbah over the licence of International Commercial Bank when the former Minister of Finance in Malaysia came to Sierra Leone to establish it.

The professional banker believes that banking licence should not be automatic and the Banking Act is quite clear on how to set up a bank in this country. As a banker who has had two licences for NDB and UTB, it took him four months as Managing Director of NDB to get a licence for the bank. He secured it on the day former President Joseph Saidu Momoh officially opened the bank. But today someone comes and gets the licence even before they start operation. He was very strict about implementing the Banking Act but today, banks come from everywhere and as long as they have the capital, the Central Bank will issue the licence.

Challenges

Sanpha Koroma strongly believes that the key challenge faced by UTB is that Sierra Leoneans have the national character of patronising with foreign banks instead of their own indigenous bank. Not that some of the foreign banks have better service than UTB, but Sierra Leoneans would rather go to them because they want the foreigner to progress and the Sierra Leonean not to progress - the pull-him-down syndrome.

Also in his humble opinion, the other problem is that the Central Bank treats all banks the same. They expect indigenous commercial banks to have the same capital like foreigner owned banks. Sanpha Koroma holds the view that in Sierra Leone it is a disadvantage because the Central Bank knows that the capital of indigenous banks is put together by shareholders of the bank. But the foreign banks bring money from abroad and you do not know where that money comes from. Some of the foreign banks go to the stock market to raise capital while Sierra Leone does not have that facility.

Sanpha and the press

When his integrity as Governor and his position on the new diamond policy became subject of press attacks, James Sanpha Koroma called a news conference on 16th January 2001 to make a statement. Making a statement about his integrity, the banking guru had this to say to the organized press: "For starters, I want to state that I came to this position of Governor of the Central Bank with an academic background and professional experience and track record that I believe, in all humility, are second to none that has ever occupied this position. I was appointed at a time when I was at the height of a very successful career in the financial sector."

He went on: "More fundamentally, in my twenty-eight years of service in the public, private and international, at no time, and I beg to repeat, at no time whatsoever, have I been branded as corrupt, nor faced any enquiry of any sort, nor terminated in any position or asked to leave a job for professional misconduct."

In his statement about "diamond in the Destiny of Sierra Leone, he lashed out at a particular news organization he alleged to have been the mouthpiece for "the entrenched and vested interests of the foreign dominated diamond marketing industry of this country."

He charged: "To the flagellating tabloids, to those who have just entered the diamond industry, and to all else that care to know, let me inform you that my crusade on the control of diamonds in this country cost me a fine career in the Ministry of Finance, and ultimately, the civil service. I was removed from the Ministry of Finance – by courtesy of the late Jamil Sahid Mohamed (May his soul rest in peace) – on account of my stubborn opposition to the establishment of the infamous Precious Minerals Marketing Company (PMMC), which was under his iron grip, and my refusal to countersign the legal documentation."

Eight years on, James Sanpha Koroma's views on the diamond industry have not changed. He tried for the last five years to bring De Beers back into Sierra Leone but the Managing Director of the multinational company refused to re-establish in Sierra Leone on the grounds that the country is not a serious market for them. James S. Koroma therefore put it in writing for former President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and President Ernest Bai Koroma that, unless we nationalize the diamond industry in this country and have a partnership between private sector and government in diamond like they have in Angola and Namibia, this country will never make benefit from its diamonds.

Other Accomplishments

Sanpha Koroma built up a National Public Debt Database at the Ministry of Finance from 1976 to 1978. He successfully restructured and rehabilitated the National Development Bank (NDB) between 1986 and 1990. Sanpha Koroma successfully structured and packaged the sale of Shell (SL) Limited in 1995 and also promoted the establishment of the following institutions:

- * First Discount House Limited
 - * Home Finance Company Limited
- He co-published – with his wife - the Sierra Leone Telecommunications Directory and Yellow Pages.

Professional Experience

When Sanpha Koroma was a postgraduate student in the United States, he worked as Management Trainee at the Western Electric Company, Allen Town, Pa. In 1991, he became Country Director, UNDES, Lagos Nigeria - a UNPP contract. He also served as Chief Technical Adviser for SME Project Funding and Evaluation at the Nigeria Industrial Development Bank until 1993 when he decided to return home upon the death of his pursuer.

Between 1994/95, Sanpha Koroma was Managing Consulate for Union Finance and Investments Limited, Freetown; Finance and Project Consulting.

From July 2003 to June 2006, he was Executive Adviser/Director of UTB responsible for corporate and business development - multilateral funding access.

Sanpha also did a professional course in Financial Analysis & Policy at the IMF Institute in Washington DC, USA, from June to December 1980.

Consultancies

Under World Bank (IBRD), Sanpha Koroma served as Financial Analyst for Ghana Economic Reconstruction Mission from October to December, 1985. In 1990, he did a consultancy job for African Development Bank, Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. He was Financial Analyst at the Industrial Development Bank of Sudan.

At home, Sanpha Koroma was Lead Consultant in the establishment of Sierra Leone Road Transport Authority, SLRTA, from 1993 to 1994 - a World Bank/Government of Sierra Leone Project.

Chairmanship and directorship

Sanpha Koroma served as Chairman in the following establishments:

Sierra Leone Farmers' Finance Company (FFC) - 1982-1985;

Sierra Leone Insurance Company Limited - 1987-1990;

Yoni Rural Bank Limited - 1988-1990;

Sierra Leone Road Transport Authority (SLRTA) - 1996-1998;

Sierra Leone Association of Commercial Banks - 1988-89 and 2001-2003 respectively.

Sanpha Koroma also served as Director in the following institutions:

Sierra Leone Produce Marketing Board (SLPMB) - 1976-1980;

National Privatisation Commission (NPC) - 2002/03;

National Revenue Authority (NRA) - 2002/03;

African Development Bank - Representing constituency comprising Ghana, Sierra Leone, The Gambia and Liberia - 1989-90;

Fellowship

Institute of Directors, Pall Mall, London, UK- 1988

Recognition

National Award: Grand Commander of the Order of the Rokel (GCOR);

International Who's Who of Professionals – 2002; Who's Who Historical Society Jacksonville, USA.

People's perception about Sanpha

Many people perceive James Sanpha Koroma as arrogant and that he hates foreigners. But he is never apologetic about the fact that people think he is arrogant. The positive banker has lived with that accusation since his initial days in the civil service. Most of those who perceive him as such do not even know the man. According to some of his close allies, James Sanpha Koroma believes in total commitment at work and does not encourage idleness. He has a track record of getting people to achieve and produce like him.

Moreover, the professional banker is a good manager that does not entertain idle workers who often brand him as arrogant. Besides, James Sanpha Koroma is very selective about his social life and this could have been misinterpreted by those who are not close to him. He does not drink in pubs or petrol stations and most people hate him because he spends his time at the exclusive Freetown Golf Club and Aqua Club. James Sanpha Koroma loathes cheap popularity.

Most of the former Bank Governor's friends are foreigners but many people believe he hates foreigners. He finds such false accusations amusing and treats the accusations with the contempt they deserve though he freely admits that he has a problem with foreigners who come to Sierra Leone and believe they are better than Sierra Leoneans. This emotion does not come from hatred of foreigners but from his intense pride of being a Sierra Leonean and a love for his country of birth.

That nationalistic pride is echoed in his own words: "The wealth of this country is in large measure generated, manipulated and effectively controlled by foreigners. It is common knowledge also that I have spent my entire professional career fighting to change that state of affairs. I know the price I have paid and apparently continue to pay in this struggle."